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Foreword

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Foreword

My colleague Dr Brian Murphy and I devised a special PhD structured module which revolves around conference organisation and dissemination. The postgraduate students are required to plan an event around a theme that complements their area of research, contact prospective speakers, organise a suitable venue, get funding in place, and then edit a special issue of *JOFIS* comprising a selection of papers that reflect the essence of what transpired. Because there was a cluster of McGahern students within the National Centre for Franco-Irish Studies (NCFIS), the decision was taken to put together a seminar in Ballinamore, located in the writer's native Leitrim, a short distance from where he and his wife Madeline lived for a number of years. Entitled **Time and Place: A Taste of John McGahern's Leitrim**, the seminar, which took place on the 10-11 May, 2018, sought to underline the manner in which the writer immortalised the landscape and people of the area where he spent the majority of his life and which inspired some of his best writing.

Thanks to the positive response of Mary Bohan and her staff in Ballinamore County Library, a wonderful venue was put at our disposal. Additional support from Leitrim Co. Council, the Shed Distillery and the NCFIS ensured that the public could attend the papers free of charge and that Dr Máire Doyle and Dr Derek Hand, two leading voices on the writings of McGahern and the Irish Novel respectively, were invited to give keynote presentations. The quality of papers given by early-career academics from NUI Galway, UCC and the NCFIS provided concrete proof that the future of McGahern Studies is in safe hands. The 'academic' side of things concluded with a stimulating dramatized reading of McGahern's short story, 'A Slip-Up', adapted for stage by Dr Máire Doyle and performed by The Dublin Shakespeare Society.

The second day was spent doing a McGahern-themed tour of some local sites strongly linked to the writer's life and work. There were readings at places like the cemetery at Aughawillan where McGahern is buried alongside his beloved mother, which were all the more wistful because of the strong winds and heavy rain that prevailed on that day. It is widely accepted that McGahern has done for the little postage stamp that is the northwest midlands of Ireland something similar to what Joyce has for Dublin, Yeats for Sligo and Heaney for Derry; namely, by concentrating on this one area, by capturing its sights, sounds, customs and people, he has given it a universal resonance. The last lines of the posthumously published short story, 'Creatures of the Earth', convey McGahern's exemplary evocation of place very well. Maggie, now in the twilight years of a life that has known much turmoil, is seated in a friend's car looking out at the moon's reflection on the lake as he opens the gate leading down to her residence, observes:

Wildfowl scattered from the reeds along the shore out towards the centre of the lake as soon as the car door opened. They squawked and shrieked for a while before turning into a dark silent huddle. Close by, a white moon rested on the water. There

was no wind. The stars in their places were clear and fixed. Who would want change since change will come without warning? Who this night would not want to live.¹

One can share in the emotion of Maggie as she contemplates the beauty of this wondrous scene and realises that at moments like these, life is worth living in spite of the pain that it brings all too regularly to some. McGahern's carefully crafted prose, his great understanding of human nature, his special feel for place, make him the canonical writer that he is acknowledged to be. The two days spent in the county that was closest to his heart allowed us to commune in a special way with his writing and to appreciate its accuracy and poignant qualities.

To conclude, I would like to congratulate the guest editors of this special issue of *JOFIS*, Aoife Carrigy and Emily Smith, along with the other two members of the organising committee, Paul Butler and Séamus O'Kane, for the energy and efficiency they brought to all the tasks associated with this event. Our sincere thanks go also to Ballinamore County Library and Leitrim County Council for their wonderful support, and to Máire Doyle and Derek Hand for sharing their time and expertise so generously.

Eamon Maher

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¹ John McGahern, *Creatures of the Earth: New and Collected Stories* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p.368.